

Marriage and Divorce Statistics and the Health Department

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IN ITS recent report, "Needs for National Studies of Population Dynamics," the U.S. National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics stated (1):

The family performs many functions that are directly relevant to population dynamics. It is the primary institution into which children are born and prepared for adult life. It is the only social grouping that man usually takes with him when he moves. Because of the importance of this basic institution in shaping the growth and distribution of our population, statistics on family formation and dissolution are essential to an adequate understanding of the nature, determinants, and consequences of population dynamics. However, data now available are not sufficient to measure trends on differentials in various phenomena associated with the family. . . .

This statement reflects acute awareness of the direct and profound effect of family-unit formation and dissolution on population trends. It indicates intensified interest of demographers in the socioeconomic characteristics of persons who contract and dissolve marriage.

The growing recognition of the broad economic, social, political, and ecological implications of population change and the need for data relevant to current demographic problems emphasizes the paucity of national marriage and divorce

statistics. Increasing concern with such matters as the rapid growth of world population, fertility and fertility regulation, the rising divorce rate, and the large numbers of young U.S. men and women currently reaching reproductive ages, entering the labor market, or marrying and forming family units all generate demands for measures of change. Statistics are needed not only to analyze, explain, and interpret the current social changes but to use as a basis for predicting the future course of events.

Measures of Social Health

Health needs are inextricably interwoven with social and economic needs. Because of the function of the family in society, the health of a community generally is directly related to the quality of its family life. As a result, public health has become increasingly concerned with the family, family research, and family-oriented health studies. Since marriage marks the beginning of a family and divorce or death its dissolution, marriage and divorce statistics are among the principal measures of social health.

There are many reasons why administrators who plan health, welfare, and educational programs should have facts about the marriages and divorces in the community served by their programs. Persons living in family groups usually receive better care when they are ill than those living alone; their pattern of life is customarily more settled; and their environment is generally more conducive to mental health. For members of

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broken homes and persons living alone, many of the family's functions must be assumed by community agencies. The need for agencies' help is generally greatest for mothers and children and for the elderly.

Facts about marriages and divorces can serve numerous public health uses. Such data can be used to plan and develop programs relating to maternal and child health services, the elderly, the newly married, the family unit, divorced mothers, and children of divorced parents. The knowledge can be used to study mental health problems and their relationship to marital status and the family, to develop instructional programs for young brides and grooms, and to study problems of early marriage and their effect on health care needs.

Marriage and divorce statistics are needed not only for public health planning but for other local and State planning. They can be used for estimating intercensal populations, households, and economic growth; projecting needs for new schools and highways; predicting needs for public utilities, hospitals, clinics, churches, parks, and recreation; and for gauging consumer markets for housing, goods, and services.

Marriage and divorce statistics have many uses in family studies. The data can be put to use in premarital and family counseling. They provide facts about the advantages and disadvantages of early marriage, the causes and effects of divorce, and the relationship between early marriage and school dropout. Such statistics can be used to evaluate the effects of changes in marriage and divorce laws on family stability.

Not to be overlooked in an assessment of the value of marriage and divorce statistics are the advantages to the person of the statewide central files of marriage and divorce records that are required as a basis for national statistics. It is not unusual for a person to be required to prove that a particular marriage has been performed or that a particular divorce has or has not been granted. Proving parentage and rights to remarry, inheritance, pension, insurance, or social security benefits may depend upon a fact of marriage or divorce. Similar proof may be needed to verify citizenship, to obtain passports, or as a basis for immigration or naturalization.

To establish such proof without central files in the States can easily be a formidable task. Officials in every jurisdiction within one or more States without a central file may have to be contacted in order to obtain the required proof. The

proper local official to contact and the address is not generally known to persons applying for proof, particularly for divorces.

In States with central files of divorce records, certification may be obtained directly from the State file or the State office may advise the interested party of the court and county where a copy of the decree can be obtained. With more than 3,000 counties in the United States and more than one court or type of court granting divorces in some counties, the need for central files of divorce records is readily apparent. The situation is similar for marriages though usually not quite as complicated.

In addition to issuing certificates or serving as a clearinghouse of information, the State vital records office can verify rapidly and accurately a particular marriage or divorce, a service often required for official reasons by legal, governmental, charitable, and voluntary agencies. This service is of special value to members of the legal profession who frequently require ready access to the facts of marriage or divorce in settling estates and other legal matters. Obtaining the information from a single office in a State not only simplifies the work of the inquirer but greatly reduces the burden placed upon local custodians of the records. Another advantage afforded by a central file is the protection of the documents against destruction by fire, flood, or other catastrophe.

Perhaps the most strongly felt need is for national marriage and divorce statistics. If the nation's social problems are to be understood and resolved, figures that will tell us what is happening in our society must be available. Age-sex-marital-status specific marriage rates for the entire United States are needed.

Fertility is the focal point in population studies. Since the birth rate is the primary determinant of population growth and the family is the structural unit primarily responsible for births, marriage rates of women at childbearing ages are an important element in population growth. Fertility patterns are also affected by the disruption of marriage by divorce and by the resumption of family status through remarriage.

If the number of marriages performed each year, the age of the participants, and previous marital status of the partners were known, rates could be calculated to describe patterns of family formation and to forecast fertility. Nuptiality tables, analagous to life tables, could be constructed to show such measures as the probability

of marriage at specified ages, the proportion of married and unmarried men and women at each age, and the proportion of each cohort who will eventually marry.

If the question "date last marriage ended" were answered for those remarrying, facts on duration of widowhood and divorced status prior to remarriage could be deduced. If divorce statistics by duration of marriage were available to be used along with mortality statistics, "life expectancy" figures for marriages at various ages could be computed. Knowing the average period of married life terminated by divorce would aid in investigating whether early age at marriage is conducive to divorce.

Data by race are needed to permit refining national fertility estimates, to provide measures applicable to the Negro and other minority populations, and to explore and describe cultural and ethnic differences. It is the item pertaining to race on the marriage and divorce certificates that enables identification of interracial marriages and divorces, a subject of particular interest in sociological research relating to the crossing of cultural boundaries.

Data on education are sought as an indicator of socioeconomic status, a factor in fertility differentials. Education is also a useful indicator of levels of health care needs. It is a relatively stable indicator as educational attainment seldom changes substantially after maturity, and the categories used to describe educational attainment are commonly understood and easily defined. This standard interpretation provides comparability with census data used for computing rates.

Marriage rates by State of residence of bride and groom is another need. The unavailability of such rates not only makes it impossible to gauge the effect that changes in State marriage laws (such as the introduction of blood tests and waiting periods or changes in age requirements) have on marriage trends, but it prevents full exploration of regional differences in marriage patterns and trends.

To put it simply, for an enlightened government of a progressive country, information should be readily available on the number of teenage marriages in the United States each year, the net effect of changes in marriage laws, how many divorced and widowed persons are remarrying, the likelihood of remarriage by marital status and age, what is happening to the age difference between bride and groom, the characteristics of

persons marrying interracially and intraracially, whether interracial marriages are increasing, and other such questions about marriages. Similarly, figures are needed that will show the effect of changes in divorce laws, what is happening to teenage marriages, at what ages marriages are most successfully launched, the comparative durability of interracial marriages, the effect of socioeconomic factors on duration of marriages, and many other facts concerning family stability.

Among those who seek such data are demographers, sociologists, economists, teachers, researchers, legislators, social workers, marriage counselors, clergymen, and private citizens; officials of local, State, and Federal governments; voluntary agencies; businesses; and industries.

Despite all of these deep-rooted needs, marriage and divorce statistics in the United States are woefully inadequate and compare unfavorably with those from other countries. Many Western countries are able to furnish complete and detailed marriage and divorce statistics for publication in the United Nations' "Demographic Yearbook" used throughout the world. The United States cannot, nor can it furnish the national marriage and divorce statistics needed by its own scholars and workers in professional fields.

For marriages and divorces in the United States there are only simple counts of events by year for each State and for each county, and even some of these counts are estimates. Statistical information on marriage and divorce trends by various characteristics for the country as a whole is nonexistent. The need is there; the data are not.

To understand this appalling lack of national marriage and divorce statistics, one must begin with the basic records from which the statistics must be extracted. Marriage and divorce records are legal documents subject to State statute. They vary widely in form and content from State to State and even, in some instances, from county to county. This lack of uniformity and the fact that many States record only a few items is the greatest obstacle to complete and comprehensive national statistics.

The action required to provide adequate marriage and divorce statistics varies. In a few States legislation is needed to establish a centralized registration system, in others it is needed to strengthen existing laws. In still others, it appears that the need is not for new legislation but rather for strengthening and application of existing rules

and regulations. Whatever the obstacle, the health department has the responsibility for leading the way toward overcoming it.

Why the Health Department?

In all but two States in the United States vital records are in the custody of the health department. Even in those States the health department has the responsibility for collecting vital records. By definition marriage and divorce records are included (2):

Vital records may be defined as those concerned with live births, deaths, foetal deaths (stillbirths), marriages, divorces, adoptions, legitimations, recognitions, annulments, and separations, in short all the events which have to do with an individual's entrance into or departure from life, together with the changes in civil status which may occur to him during his lifetime. It follows that vital statistics are those statistics which, for a designated population group, provide a description of the number and characteristics of the vital events which are taking place therein. . . .

That marriage and divorce statistics are collected and compiled in the health department appears to be largely the result of their early inclusion with birth and death records as part of vital statistics. This association existed as far back as the reign of Henry VIII. The common thread was the ceremonial function of the clergy in each of the events. The following order of Thomas Cromwell, Vicar General under Henry VIII (1538), required the clergy to record baptisms, marriages, and burials (3).

. . . That you and every parson vicare or curate within this diocese shall for every church kepe one boke or registre wherein ye shall write the day and yere of every weddyng christenyng and buryeng made within yor parishe for your tyme, and so every man succeedyng you lykewyse. And shall there insert every persons name that shalbe so weddid christened or buried. And for the sauff kepinge of the same boke the parishe shalbe bonde to provide of these comen charges one sure coffer with two lockes and keys whereof the one to remayne with you, and the other with the said wardens, wherein the saide boke shalbe laide upp. Whiche boke ye shall every Sunday take furthe and in the presence of the said wardens or one of them write and recorde in the same all the weddinges christenynges and buryenges made the hole weke before. And that done to lay upp the boke in the said coffer as afore. And for every tyme that the same shalbe omytted the partie that shalbe in the faulte thereof shall forfeit to the saide church 11s 11ld to be employed on the reparation of the same church. . . .

"Thomas Cromwell"

This custom followed the English settlers to America (4).

In 1632, the Grand Assembly of Virginia passed a law requiring a minister or warden from every parish to

appear annually at court on the 1st day of June and present a register of christenings, marriages, and burials for the year.

In 1639 the legislative body of Massachusetts Bay Colony placed the responsibility on government officers rather than on the clergy by passing a law calling for the recording (4) "of every marriage, birth, and death of every person within this jurisdiction."

The association of records of marriages with records of births and deaths continued through the years and, as vital statistics became an entity, marriage statistics and later divorce statistics became part of it. Several important developments cemented this association.

1. The early definition of vital statistics embraced marriage statistics (5).

William Farr, who coined the phrase "vital statistics," conceived of it as "the statistics of health, sickness, diseases, and death. . . ." But Farr's original definition was quickly widened in his own practice to include births and marriages, and in that extension of the field he has been followed by all subsequent writers. . . . The last division is the statistics of divorce, not touched by Farr because when he wrote, divorces, being obtainable in England only by special act of Parliament, were very few. . . .

2. The medical profession included marriage and divorce in its early endorsement of vital statistics (6).

Medical interest in birth, marriage, and death registration in the United States roughly parallels that in England. As early as 1846 the American Medical Association created a special committee to consider ways and means for improving the registration of births, marriages, and deaths. Upon the basis of the findings of this and subsequent committees, the association formally resolved in 1855 that the members of the profession "be urgently requested to take immediate and concerted action" to establish offices for the collection of vital statistics and further resolved that "a committee of one from each State be appointed to report a uniform system of registration of marriages, births, and deaths."

3. The model vital statistics law has included marriage and divorce registration since 1942. Four sections, 33-36, of the "Uniform Vital Statistics Act," a model bill drafted by the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws in 1942, dealt with marriage and divorce registration. The 1959 revision, entitled "Model State Vital Statistics Act," also covers both, section 22 on marriage registration and section 23 on court reports of divorce and annulment of marriage.

4. The American Public Health Association at its 76th Annual Meeting held at Boston, November 10, 1948, passed a resolution recognizing

. . . the need for more adequate marriage and divorce statistics, to provide much needed information on many aspects of the health and well-being of the family, community, State and nation . . . , acknowledging that

. . . vital statistics of marriages and divorces can most feasibly be developed through the same channels as have proved effective for vital statistics of births and deaths, as part of the public health programs of the several States, with development of national statistics through cooperative State-federal relationships . . . , and expressing its support for

. . . State centralization of marriage and divorce records and statistics and their integration with other vital records and statistics, and urges all States not yet operating such an integrated system to effect this urgently needed change at the earliest possible time. . . .

5. The following statement of policy on marriage and divorce registration, approved by the working group on marriage and divorce registration and recommended by the Public Health Conference on Records and Statistics (1951), strongly endorsed keeping marriage and divorce files with those on births and deaths and documented public health concerns with marriage and divorce (7).

. . . Public health is directly interested in and concerned with all the vital events which effect the well-being of individuals and the communities in which they reside. Hence, maintenance of information and records on natality, mortality, and morbidity has been commonly accepted as a function of the State health department where other vital statistics are already collected, tabulated, and compiled.

It is a fact that location of marriage and divorce registration in the State health department would tend to reduce costs inasmuch as administrative machinery, personnel and equipment required in processing marriage and divorce records are of the same type as that used for vital statistics. Since 56 of 57 State and independent registration areas have lodged responsibility for central birth and death registration machinery within their public health departments, similar provision for marriage and divorce registers would serve to facilitate the preparation of searches, certified copies of certificates, analyses, compilations and summaries of vital statistics data and their dissemination to the interested public.

Moreover, public health is concerned with the social, economic, and biological characteristics of the family unit, its stability, size and composition, and its rate of growth or decline. Increasingly in recent years, Statewide vital statistics have been utilized in planning programs for pre-natal and nursing care, child and maternal health, venereal disease control, epidemiological problems and other State and local welfare measures. Health officers are concerned with public health implications of marriage. Almost all States, for instance, have enacted legislation requiring premarital physical examination and blood tests for venereal disease, while a number of States require freedom from epilepsy, tuberculosis and insanity. Placing marriage and divorce registers within the State

public health department will make available in each State one central, ready point of reference for all vital records and statistics and will assure effective utilization of their numerous public health aspects.

6. Vital statistics published by the United Nations include marriage and divorce statistics. In the "Handbook of Vital Statistics Methods" the vital statistics system is defined in the terms of "events" (2a).

". . . vital statistics has come to mean statistics of live birth, death, foetal death (stillbirth), marriage, divorce, adoption, legitimation, recognition, annulment and legal separation."

7. A recommendation adopted by the Executive Committee of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officers in July 1966 (8) urged improved registration of marriages and divorces and named State health departments as logical centers for gathering the records and statistics as follows:

TITLE: State Centralization of Marriage and Divorce Records and Statistics

Health department programming at all levels depends upon accurate statistics of family formation as well as family disintegration. State health departments in connection with their vital statistics activities (birth and death registration) are logical centers for gathering marriage and divorce records and statistics pertaining to them. State vital statistics are freely available not only to State and local authorities, but also to the National Center for Health Statistics of the Public Health Service (DHEW).

It is recommended that States which are not already in the National Marriage and/or Divorce Registration Area take necessary steps for admission. Statistics pertaining to these records should be made available to proper authorities within the States as well as the Federal Government.

In this perspective the ties between marriage and divorce statistics and the health department have been strengthened over the years. It is certainly no less true now than earlier that the expertise and administrative machinery for the registration and processing of marriage and divorce records and for the dissemination of marriage and divorce statistics are found, along with that for other vital events, in the health department. This situation together with an increasing awareness and concern with the health implications of population growth, composition, and distribution, and a growing recognition of the need for planning public health services around the family, surely establishes marriage and divorce statistics as an integral part of the statistical system under the purview of the health department.

Why, then, does a sense of urgency not pervade State and local health departments, compelling them to direct sufficient energies and resources to

the task of producing creditable marriage and divorce statistics for the United States? The most likely answer is that the need for such statistics has not been fully recognized in the places where the action must begin.

Registration Areas

Marriages are usually recorded where the marriage license is issued, a most logical and necessary procedure but one that must be dealt with in obtaining national statistics. The basic records pertaining to marriages consist of the application for a marriage license, the license, the official record of marriage, and the certificate given to the parties by the officiant after the ceremony has been performed. In some areas one paper serves two or more of these functions; in others each is a separate record. The varied practices of the States make it difficult to generalize about procedures.

Applications for marriage licenses are usually obtained from city or county clerks, filled in by the applicants, and returned to the clerk, or completed by the clerk from information provided by the applicants. In some instances the application becomes the official record and is signed and dated by the official performing the marriage. Where it does not, the clerk transfers the information from the application to the official record.

The marriage license and record are issued to the applicants who take them to the officiant. The officiant performs the marriage, certifies on the record the date and place of marriage, and returns this document along with the license to the clerk for registration. In most cases the person performing the ceremony also completes and gives to the couple a certificate of marriage containing their names and the date and place of marriage over the signature of the officiant.

Presenting a similar problem in gathering national statistics, divorces are recorded where they are granted. Records pertaining to divorces are kept in the docket of the court that grants the decree. The preferred procedure makes the attorneys responsible for completing the records, but the procedure depends primarily upon the State law or the rule of the court.

Collection of marriage and divorce records from the multitude of scattered local jurisdictions would be a formidable task for the Federal Government. In addition there is no legal authority for such a Federal collection system. Consequently, State laws and collection mechanisms are relied upon, and complete and accurate registration is

promoted through the Marriage and Divorce Registration Areas, similar in concept to the registration areas used successfully in the early 1900's to promote birth and death registration.

The Marriage Registration Area (MRA) was established in 1957 and the Divorce Registration Area (DRA) in 1958. To be admitted to the registration areas, States are required not only to have the events recorded locally but also to collect copies or abstracts of the records in central State files, to adopt for this purpose a statistical report form which includes required items of information, to maintain regular and timely reporting to the State office by all local areas, and to agree to cooperate with the National Center for Health Statistics in tests of completeness and accuracy of marriage or divorce registration. Registration of events and reporting of required items is expected to be at least 90 percent complete.

Required items for divorces are age at divorce or date of birth, place of usual residence (State), number and date of marriage being dissolved, number of children involved, county where decree was granted, date, and legal grounds. Race and education are recommended but optional items.

Required items for marriages are date and place of marriage (State and county), place of residence (State and county), age at marriage or date of birth, previous marital status, and number of this marriage. Recommended but optional items are race, education, State of birth, and type of ceremony.

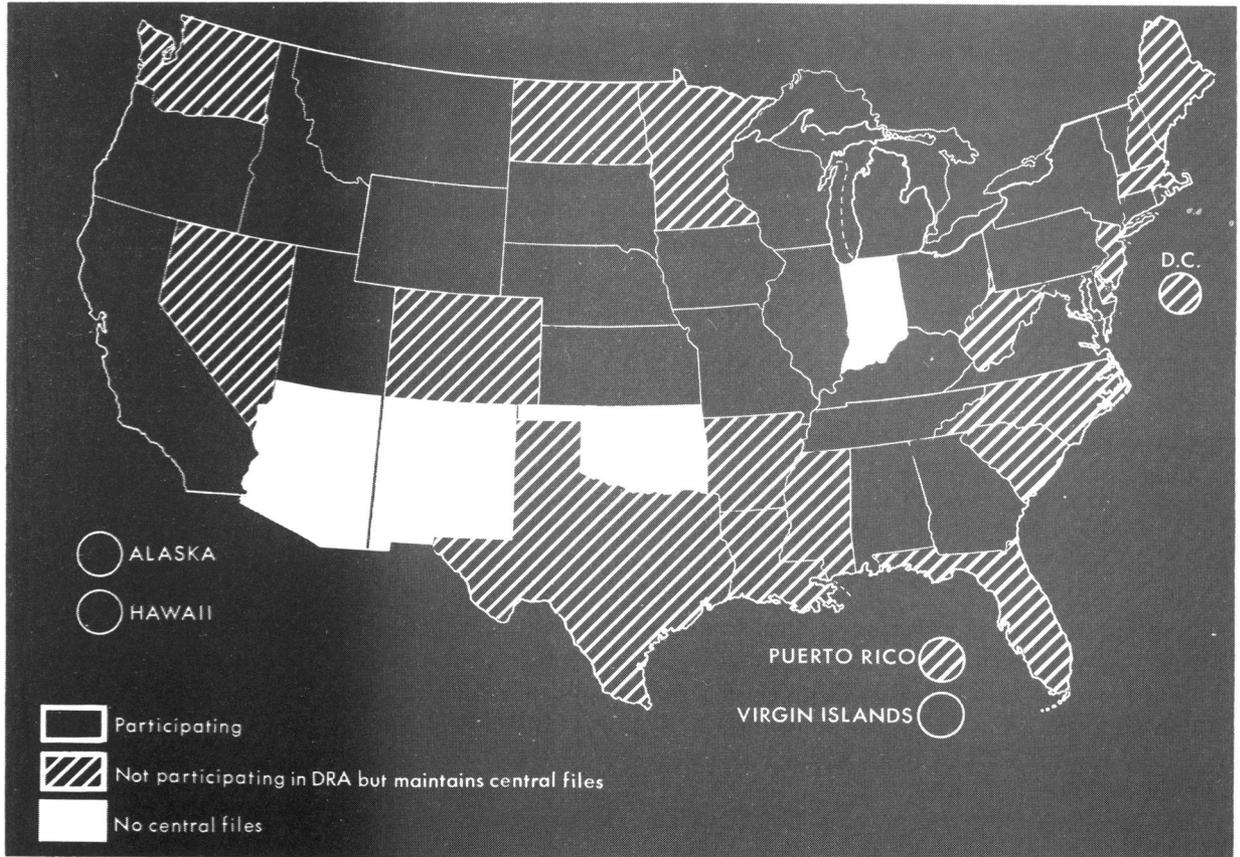
In 1970, 39 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands constituted the MRA (fig. 1). This was an addition of seven States and two cities (New York City and the District of Columbia) since the MRA was established in 1957. Minnesota recently met all requirements for admission to the MRA and was admitted in 1971.

In 1970, 28 States and the Virgin Islands comprised the DRA (fig. 2), 12 more States than in 1958. South Carolina met all requirements for the DRA and was admitted effective January 1971.

Major Deficiencies

The first step in the production of national marriage and divorce statistics under this system is for each State to set up a centralized reporting mechanism. Some States have not taken this first step. Of the 10 States that have not met requirements for the Marriage Registration Area, three have not yet established central marriage files. Of the 21

Figure 2. Divorce registration area status, 1970



some of the States already in the Divorce Registration Area. Reporting of essential items is generally quite complete for the States presently in the Marriage Registration Area, but for States in the Divorce Registration Area it is just the opposite. Essential items on the divorce form are poorly reported by many States.

When two basic items (age at decree and number of the marriage being dissolved) are not stated on more than 50 percent of the divorce records for six DRA States, and when these items are reported satisfactorily by only about half of the DRA States, the question that arises is "What is the significance of the Divorce Registration Area?" If reasonable reporting standards were applied, at least 10 States would have to be dropped from the DRA.

The experience of the States that have been most successful in establishing effective reporting systems for divorces is a matter of record and worthy of emulation. Of the early reporting States, Hawaii, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, Tennessee,

Virginia, and Wisconsin have been outstanding in their statistical reporting of essential items from the divorce records. In general, such achievements have been based on intensive work of the registrars with clerks of court, attorneys, and judges, both before and after strong vital statistics laws have been enacted.

Effective reporting has been readily accomplished in States where marriage and divorce reporting has been made an integral part of the total administrative system involved with the event. This has been demonstrated most recently in California, where marriage and divorce registration is incorporated in the law governing the domestic relations systems. With responsibility for furnishing specific information fixed by law, the information is obtained at the time action begins from those best qualified to give correct answers. It is not difficult to see that this is a far more productive process than requiring someone, as an "added duty," to extract specific items of information from numerous legal documents if the information "happens" to be there.

The interest and support of the persons who will be most involved if good records are to be produced have proved most helpful in developing and enacting legislation as well as in its implementation. The cooperation of attorneys in obtaining the information from their clients, of judges in making available information collected for their own use and in requiring the attorney for the plaintiff to complete the personal items on the divorce record before a petition can be filed, and of court clerks in reviewing the records and recording the essential items, are all necessary to a successful program.

In some States, the registrars have found it helpful to promote the use of face sheets to facilitate gathering and recording required information and by instituting inquiries to follow up records with missing information. In other States registrars have brought together the representatives of the State bar association, the National Council on Family Relations, and the American Sociological Association to map out legislative or administrative strategy to improve divorce reporting. It is evident from the experience of all of these States that good reporting has not just happened. Good reporting has been attained only through painstaking and persevering efforts.

Promotion of several highly desirable optional items for inclusion by the States on their marriage and divorce records has met with limited success. Race or color, the item identifying interracial marriages and providing measures for a large minority population, is not on the marriage certificates of five MRA States (Maryland, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and California) and is not entered on the certificates from Cook and DuPage Counties of Illinois. Ohio and Michigan of the DRA States also omit the item from their divorce certificates. Exclusion of the race item is largely due to efforts of the American Civil Liberties Union.

The opponents of the item have argued that asking persons to state their color or race on the application for a marriage license is unnecessary and offensive, that it provides no useful information, and that it might be used in a discriminatory way. Counter arguments emphasize the value of data classified by race and their usefulness for studying the extent and rate of cultural merging through interracial marriages; for showing the differentials and degree of convergence between the major racial groups in such phenomena as rate of family formation, age at marriage, and family sta-

bility; and in providing a basis for more reliable fertility projections and population forecasts.

It is further argued that the usual uses of the marriage certificate are not such as to occasion opportunities for discriminatory practices. The National Center for Health Statistics takes the position that the item serves a useful purpose in guidance of public policy, and that by excluding it from the marriage certificate the nation is denied facts about a basic social institution and a large minority group, as well as access to knowledge of the change or lack of change in social conditions. Its exclusion undermines the factual basis for developing social policies and for measuring progress toward social goals.

To ease concern over possible discriminatory uses, the Center recommends that the question be located in a confidential section of the record available for statistical purposes only. The Center also points out that where discrimination and civil rights violations exist, reliable statistics by race have been one of the most effective weapons of the minority group. Vital statistics tabulations have been used repeatedly to demonstrate differentials that need correcting.

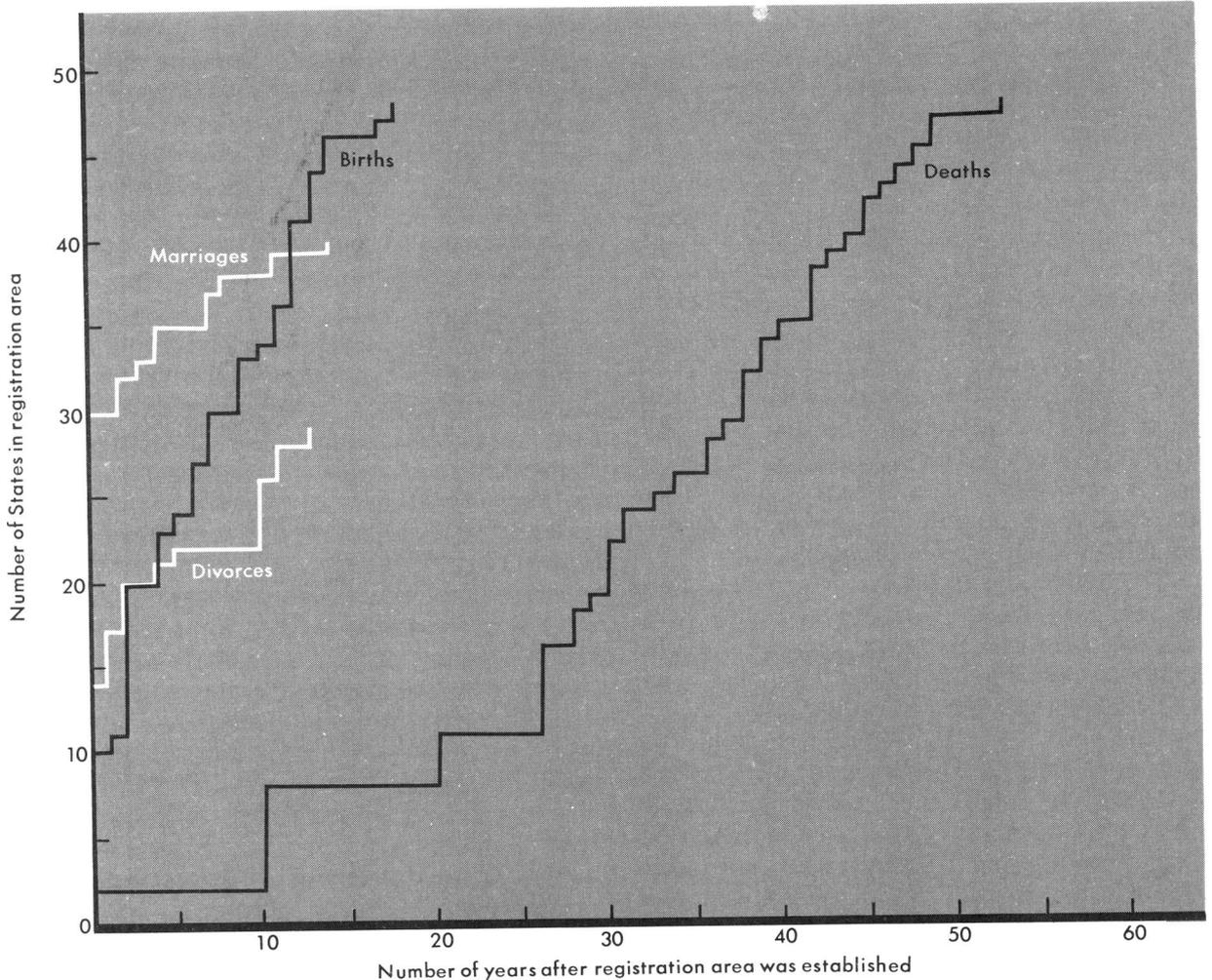
Furthermore, a number of national figures, scholars, sociologists, and others concerned with race relations, have officially gone on record as favoring retention of the item on race. Dr. G. Franklin Edwards, an internationally known professor at Howard University, has said on this subject (9):

In view of the charge that the publication of data with sharp differentials by race—as in the case of some health statistics—leads to embarrassment because such data are usually not properly interpreted by the reading public, it should be observed that the situation will never be understood as long as it cannot be properly defined and assessed. The real danger is in having no statistics, rather than in having them as a basis of evaluation. Rumors and prejudice are likely to thrive in those areas which cannot be evaluated.

In this connection it can be stated categorically that reliable statistics by race in those areas where discrimination and civil rights violations are alleged afford the minority group the best protection it can hope to have. It would appear that instead of working for the elimination of race from public records, many minority group leaders would insist that the item be included and data based upon it be made available for public use.

The American Public Health Association, Association of State and Territorial Health Officers, American Sociological Association, Population Association of America, Social Statistics Section of the American Statistical Association, and the National Urban League have all passed

Figure 3. Development of registration areas



formal resolutions favoring collection of data on race. The U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed a lower Federal Court ruling which upheld the legal right of a State to ask for information on race where the purpose is not discriminatory. These data would be much more useful if collected by all States.

Two optional items were added in the 1968 revision of the standard certificates: "education," to be stated on both the marriage and divorce records, and "date last marriage ended," to be entered on the marriage records of the previously married. These items are gradually being adopted by the States. The education item is now on the records of 14 Marriage Registration Area States and 14 Divorce Registration Area States, and the item for date last marriage ended is on the records of 19 MRA States.

In summary, most shortcomings of current mar-

riage and divorce statistics exist because standardized procedures and forms are not used nationwide for reporting essential information. The present system of recording and reporting can provide adequate marriage and divorce statistics for the United States only when every State has (a) enacted legislation establishing a centralized system of recording marriages and divorces, (b) adopted a reporting form for use throughout the State that contains at least the items on the standard certificates recommended by the Public Health Service, and (c) brought the reporting of these items up to acceptable standards.

The Task Ahead

Pessimism about the rate of progress in attaining national coverage of marriages and divorces can be partly offset by recalling the 50 or more years of intensive work in pursuit of national birth

and death statistics. Much less than half as much time has been spent on marriage and divorce statistics (fig. 3), and the resources going into the effort have not been even remotely comparable.

The National Center for Health Statistics stands ready to help in any way possible to encourage and aid the development of national marriage and divorce statistics. In recent years the resources of the Center have been inadequate to meet its responsibilities in promoting marriage and divorce statistics; a strengthening of this function is one requisite for an all-out drive for national coverage.

But a successful program depends upon all levels of government. As has been demonstrated, it requires the interest, cooperation, and active support of many persons at local and State levels including health officers, registrars, legislators, judges, attorneys, clerks of court, and others involved in the process of providing and implementing adequate vital statistics laws.

The health department has many allies willing to promote national marriage and divorce statistics. The American Bar Association has endorsed central registration. In October 1961, the Board of Governors of the American Bar Association at a meeting in Chicago adopted the resolution of the Section of Family Law and went on record as (a) endorsing the establishment and maintenance of State files of marriage and divorce records in all States, (b) urging all States to take steps to qualify for participation in the Marriage Registration Area and Divorce Registration Area, and (c) supporting the adoption in all States of necessary legislation to accomplish these purposes. On August 25, 1961, at Salt Lake City, Utah, the National Council on Family Relations at its annual meeting passed a resolution urging all States to participate fully in this program, including becoming a part of the registration areas, and asked each member to support the program in his own State.

Members of the American Sociological Association have voluntarily testified before State legislatures as to the need for this information. Through its Committee on Government Statistics they have made available a roster of eminent sociologists throughout the United States who are eager to work in any way to improve marriage and divorce statistics.

The present challenge to the health department

in every State with inadequate reporting of marriage and divorce statistics is to marshal all forces within the State for a concerted drive toward centralized marriage and divorce registration. Special emphasis on complete reporting of statistical items on the records for each of these events occurring within the State is essential. Surely with renewed efforts at all levels of government the United States can soon have national marriage and divorce statistics that will compare favorably with the best available from other countries.

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